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ABSTRACT

This study examined differences in the use of and beliefs about drugs, by high school athletes and non-athletes. Data for the study were derived from a representative sample of 10,259 7th through 12th grade students in North Carolina conducted in the spring of 1987. Data reported in the study were limited to 11th and 12th grade students, who are most likely to engage in organized athletics. Of these two grades, 3,328 were student athletes. Results showed student athletes' use of and beliefs about substances were in general more like those of non-athletes than they were different. Athletes' lifetime and 30-day use of marijuana, cocaine, and hallucinogens were the same as that of non-athletes. Athletes' and non-athletes' beliefs about the risks of using five of the seven substances about which they were asked were also similar. However, athletes were less likely to smoke cigarettes than non-athletes. Athletes' use of smokeless tobacco exceeded that of non-athletes. While athletes were no more likely than non-athletes to use alcohol or get drunk over the course of their lifetime, they were significantly more likely to do both over the 30 days prior to the survey. It is also of concern that both athletes and non-athletes gave by far the lowest risk ratings to the two items relating to alcohol use. These results appear to shatter the illusion that, relative to non-athletes, athletes are avoiding alcohol drugs, and tobacco. (ABL)

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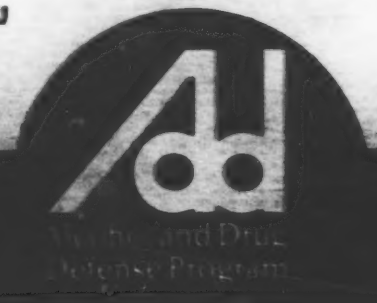

Student Athletes and Non-Athletes Do Their Use Of, And Beliefs About Alcohol and Other Drugs Differ?

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STUDENT ATHLETES AND NON-ATHLETES: DO THEIR USE OF, AND BELIEFS ABOUT, ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS DIFFER?

Student athletes are generally believed to be too involved with sports to use drugs. We tend to hold our athletes up to the rest of our students as exemplars, in the expectation that athletes will serve as role models. Substance abuse programs targeted specifically at athletes are proliferating, on the assumption that this population is particularly amenable to our prevention efforts, and that the good effects of these programs will then be diffused to the rest of our students. But do our student athletes' use of, and beliefs about, alcohol and other drugs truly differ from those of our non-athletes? The purpose of this report is to begin to take a hard look at these cherished assumptions.

The specific questions this report addresses are as follows.

1. Do athletes differ from non-athletes on their:

   a) lifetime use of substances?
   b) 30-day use of substances?

2. Do athletes' perceptions of the risks of using substances differ from those of non-athletes?

The data for this study is derived from a representative sample of 10,259 7th through 12th grade students in North Carolina conducted in the spring of 1987 by the Alcohol and Drug Defense Division. The data reported here is limited to 11th and 12th grade students, who are most likely to engage in organized athletics. Students were characterized as athletes if they reported "playing sports on an organized school team" either in the fall, the spring, or both the fall and spring. Of the 3,328 student athletes in these two grades, 62% were male. While Blacks constitute only 26% of 11th and 12th grade students, they represented 31% of of our athletes. Athletes made significantly higher grades than non-athletes.

Table 1 displays the percentages of student athletes and non-athletes who reported lifetime use of various substances. Table 2 indicates similar information for students' 30-day use of the same substances. An asterisk (*) in the final column of each table indicates that the difference observed was statistically significant, as determined by a Chi-square test. The more asterisks in the final column, the greater the difference between athletes and non-athletes. An "NS" indicates that the difference was <u>not</u> statistically significant.

Table 1

Lifetime Use of Selected Substances

	Athletes	Non-Athletes	Significance of Difference
1. Cigarettes	54.5%	61.2%	*****
2. Smokeless tobacco	41.3%	30.7%	*****
3. Alcohol (beer, wine, or liquor)	77.3%	75.2%	NS
4. Marijuana	48.7%	47.5%	NS
5. Cocaine	9.0%	11.0%	NS
6. Hallucinogens	5.8%	7.2%	NS
7. Uppers	20.3%	24.6%	**
8. Downers	12.9%	15.5%	*
9. Got drunk	62.6%	60.2%	NS

NS = non-significant; * = $p<.05$; ** = $p<.01$; *** = $p<.005$; **** = $p<.001$; ***** = $p<.0001$

Table 2

30-Day Use of Selected Substances

	Athletes	Non-Athletes	Significance of Difference
1. Cigarettes	20.1%	30.1%	*****
2. Smokeless tobacco	12.7%	9.4%	***
3. Alcohol (beer, wine, or liquor)	47.5%	43.0%	*
4. Marijuana	20.2%	19.6%	NS
5. Cocaine	2.9%	2.4%	NS
6. Hallucinogens	1.1%	0.9%	NS
7. Uppers	5.2%	5.8%	NS
8. Downers	3.5%	4.2%	NS
9. Got drunk	29.0%	25.2%	*

NS = non-significant; * = $p<.05$; ** = $p<.01$; *** = $p<.005$; **** = $p<.001$; ***** = $p<.0001$

Athletes' beliefs about the risks of using substances are compared to those of non-athletes in Table 3. Students were asked "what chance is there that someone your age will develop health problems if they..." The statistical test used here is Student's T, since response options for these questions were continuous (i.e., "no chance," "low chance," "moderate chance," and "high chance"). Students who answered "don't know" were eliminated from the sample for this analysis. The figures reported are the mean for the group; the higher the number, the greater the perceived risk.

Table 3

Perceptions of Risks Associated with Substance Use

	Athletes	Non-Athletes	Significance of Difference
1. Smoke 1 or more packs of cigarettes per day	3.48	3.47	NS
2. Smoke marijuana occasionally	3.23	3.25	NS
3. Get drunk once or twice	2.41	2.44	NS
4. Have 1 or 2 drinks occasionally	2.34	2.36	NS
5. Use marijuana at least once a week	3.16	3.23	*
6. Use smokeless tobacco, chewing tobacco, or snuff regularly	3.14	3.21	*
7. Try cocaine or crack once or twice	3.43	3.44	NS

NS = non-significant; * = $p<.05$

As these tables reveal, student athletes' use of and beliefs about substances were, in general, more like those of non-athletes than they were different. Athletes' lifetime and 30-day use of marijuana, cocaine, and hallucinogens were the same as that of non-athletes. Athletes' and non-athletes' beliefs about the risks of using five of the seven substances about which they asked were also similar.

However, there were some areas in which athletes and non-athletes differed markedly. Both over the course of their lifetimes and particularly over the 30 days prior to the survey, athletes were very much less likely to smoke

cigarettes than non-athletes. It appears that athletes have clearly gotten the message that cigarettes may have a detrimental effect on their health. This difference is not reflected, however, in athletes' perceptions of the risks of smoking one or more packs of cigarettes on a daily basis. This result is congruent with prior research findings that changes in perceptions of risk are not necessarily linked with changes in behavior.

The fact that athletes' lifetime and 30 day use of smokeless tobacco exceeded that of non-athletes is not particularly surprising, nor are athletes' perceptions of regular smokeless tobacco use as less hazardous than the risks perceived by of non-athletes. White males, who are disproportionately represented in organized athletics, are also much more likely to use smokeless tobacco than Blacks or White females. It is clear that much work remains to be done to reduce the use of smokeless tobacco by our athletes.

While athletes were no more likely than non-athletes to use alcohol or get drunk over the course of their lifetime, they were significantly more likely to do both over the 30 days prior to the survey. That athletes' 30-day alcohol use was almost 50%, and that almost 30% got drunk during the same period, is a cause for great concern. It is also of concern that both athletes and non-athletes gave by far the lowest risk ratings to the two items relating to alcohol use. It seems that alcohol consumption may be an integral part of the culture of athletic life, and students in general appear to believe that alcohol use is relatively risk free.

These results appear to shatter the illusion that, relative to non-athletes, our athletes are avoiding alcohol, drugs, and tobacco. Indeed, they are both drinking more, drinking to excess more, and are using more smokeless tobacco. The one very encouraging finding from this study is that athletes appear to be greatly reducing their use of cigarettes.

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Research Coordinator

For more information about this report, or about other ADD services, contact the ADD office in your regional center or in Raleigh. This special report provides valuable data for the "Student Athletes Summer Institute" (SASI) Programs across the state. Your continued help in increasing prevention and intervention services to student athletes is appreciated!